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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s, the charter-school movement emerged as one of the more promising new ideas in education. This paper juxtaposes the charter-school concept with ideas on change theory and curriculum design. The article's purpose is to illustrate how charter schools might be a vehicle for change in education. Research shows that states have enacted charter-school legislation to achieve a variety of purposes: to encourage innovation, to promote performance-based accountability, to expand choices, and to foster innovation and change by freeing educators from unnecessary bureaucratic constraints. Such innovation is important in understanding education, particularly in light of considering the durability of the educational hierarchy over the past 100 years. It is argued that educators must recognize the difference between first-order and second- order change when defining fundamental issues. Likewise, when designing curriculum, educators must consider those characteristics that bind people together, such as individuals' capacity to recall the past and to anticipate the future. It is claimed that the charter-school movement's promise lies in its potential to alter traditional outlooks in education. (Contains 15 references.) (RJM)

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Charter Schools: An Avenue to Quality Education

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CHARTER SCHOOLS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION

Introduction

During the 1990s, the charter school movement has emerged as one of the most prominent and promising new ideas in education--prominent because of the media attention and legislative activity, and promising because of the potential for promoting new thinking about schooling. The charter school movement grew out of a belief that carefully developed competition among existing public schools and new kinds of schools developed by local educators, parents, community members, school board and other sponsors could provide both new models of schooling and the incentives to improve the current system of public education (United States Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1997).

Our interest in charter schools developed when a representative of our State Board of Education contacted us to examine the concept and report our findings to the Board. We had studied previously the various reform and restructuring movements in K-12 education, but found many of them to be mostly cosmetic in their approaches to needed changes in public schools. Then, based on our review of the literature on charter schools, we came to believe that these new entities offered a "best of all worlds" approach to true innovation in schooling. As currently configured, charter schools embrace the best principles of a public educational system, while offering flexibility and choice to the educational consumer. They do not detour people toward a private education, rather they accommodate differences in a very public way. In theory, charter schools appear to be a way to advance change within the constructs of the current public education system without destroying the system. They are islands of change in the stormy sea of school reform.

But if the potential of charter schools is to be realized, then they must not be only a facade for change. If a charter school is nothing more than a new

organizational structure within which traditional schooling is pursued, then the real promise of charter schools will never be fulfilled. Pierce (1997) indicated that the "ultimate goal of this growing movement (charters schools) is to decentralize control until each site functions independently, competing with other schools in an open marketplace. Such competition should eventually raise educational standards for everyone as ill-managed schools reform or close."

Literature in the field of education includes many reports on charter schools, numerous pleas for meaningful school reform and restructuring, and some illustrations of what truly innovative schooling might be. The discussion that follows brings together with the charter school concept some ideas proposed by Cuban (1988) about change theory and by Boyer (1992) about curriculum design. The purpose of this article is to provide an illustration of how charter schools might be a vehicle for bringing about major changes in education that would lead to very different paradigms of schooling.

Charter Schools

The nation's first charter school legislation was enacted by the Minnesota Legislature in 1991 (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995). By September of 1997, 29 states and the District of Columbia have authorized over 700 charter schools which enroll approximately 170,000 students (Finn, Manno, Bierlein, and Vanourek, 1997). Definitions of a charter school vary, but most express the notion of a public entity created by and operated pursuant to a charter, which is a contract negotiated between those who want to operate such a school and the public entity with authority to issue a charter. The organizers of such a school (those who apply for a charter and manage the school) may be teachers, parents, or others from either the public or private sector; the sponsors (those who authorize and oversee the charter) may be local school boards, state education boards, or some other public entity (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995).

In 1995, the status of the charter school movement was stated succinctly in a preliminary draft of a report by the Education Commission of the States & The Center for School Change (1995): "Until now it has been too early to say what these schools actually look like. It is still too early to ask how they are doing" (p. 2). By 1997, some reports began to emerge that indicated some charter schools were successful in improving academic achievement of students. For example, three charter school in Boston reported increased achievement in mathematics and reading (The Economist, 1997).

States have enacted charter school legislation to achieve a variety of purposes: to encourage innovation; to promote performance-based accountability; to expand choices in the types of public schools available; to create new professional opportunities for teachers; to improve student learning; and to promote community involvement (United States General Accounting Office, 1995). The appeal of the charter school movement was summarized by Molnar (1996); "[t]o many educators, parents, and politicians, the charter school idea represented a public education alternative to private school voucher proposals. It was an idea they could embrace enthusiastically because it seemed to protect public education as an institution and at the same time provide for fundamental reform and systemic 'restructuring' " (p.9). O'Neil (1996) offered the thought that "creating different school programs and offering parent choices among them makes sense because there is no 'one best school' for every child" (p. 7).

One of the most common themes for the establishment of charter schools found in the literature is that of promoting innovation and change by freeing educators from unnecessary bureaucratic constraints, with the ultimate goal of providing better educational opportunities for students (Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995; Kolderie, 1994; Semple, 1995; Wagner, 1994; Willis, 1994). Research conducted by the U. S. Office of Education (1997) explored the reasons why charter schools were

founded. Educational vision, autonomy, service to special needs populations, finances, and attraction of parents and students were among the highest priorities.

We found of special interest a research finding that over two-thirds of those associated with newly-created charter schools indicated "educational vision" as the primary motivating factor in their formation. In contrast, fewer than one-third of those associated with pre-existing public schools that converted to charter schools cited "educational vision" as their primary motivating factor, while about one-half "proclaimed autonomy" (freedom from bureaucracy) as the most important reason for their conversion. We think the difference implies that those who create new charter schools tend to have a stronger sense of visionary purpose than those who convert existing schools to charter schools. We also believe that the visionary philosophy associated with the newly-created charter schools provides an opportunity for innovation leading to truly meaningful changes in the public education arena.

The provisions in charter school legislation are critical. To create an environment in which educational innovation can flourish, states must make possible, and indeed encourage, the pursuit of different approaches to schooling.

In some settings, excessive bureaucratic control may indeed constrain educational innovation; however, in many school systems the specter of a stifling bureaucracy may be more perception than reality. Many of the purposes envisioned for charter schools may be pursued in existing school systems. But what the charter school movement can do is stimulate new thinking about schooling and about truly meaningful innovation and change.

Innovation and Change

In an article on change theory, Cuban (1988) reflected on what he saw as a fundamental puzzle of school reform--why basic ways of schooling have been so remarkably durable over the last hundred years.

To explore this puzzle, he posited a theory that there are two kinds of reform: first-order changes and second-order changes. He used the investigation of the 1986 Challenger space shuttle disaster to illustrate the pursuit of the nature of the problem. Was the accident a quality control problem (requiring first-order changes), a design problem (requiring second-order changes), or some combination of the two? Similarly, to resolve issues of schooling there is a need to determine whether problems should be seen as quality control issues or design issues, or some combination of the two.

First-order changes are those that try to make what already exists more efficient and more effective, without disturbing the basic organizational features and without substantially altering the ways in which adults and children perform their roles. Those who propose first-order changes believe that existing goals and structures of schooling are both adequate and desirable. In contrast, second-order changes seek to alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together. They reflect major dissatisfactions with present arrangements. Second-order changes introduce new goals, structures, and roles that transform familiar ways of doing things into new ways of solving persistent problems.

Cuban argued that while first-order reforms (quality control issues) have been common, second-order reforms (basic design issues) have not. Policy makers and practitioners alike seem to focus willingly on finding better ways of doing what is currently being done, but to resist the notion of finding new purposes and structures for schools. He believed that for fundamental, second-order changes to sweep away current structures and start anew, basic social and political changes would need to occur outside of schools.

Distinguishing between Cuban's first-order changes and second-order changes is not always easy, but two examples are offered by way of illustration: legislation promoting mergers of inadequate school districts would be a first-order change

(quality control issue), while legislation authorizing the creation of charter schools would be a second-order change (design issue); legislation requiring more credit hours for high school graduation would be a first-order change (quality control issue), while legislation requiring an individual education program for students with disabilities would be a second-order change (design issue).

The characterization of educational reform in terms of first-order changes and second-order changes may prove to be useful in defining a fundamental issue--whether to focus on improving what is or to focus on bringing about what ought to be.

Rethinking Schooling

Boyer (1992) offered a dramatically different approach to curriculum design. His thesis was that education in a multicultural world should be based on a theme of common human experience.

Boyer and a colleague had suggested several years earlier that the core curriculum in the nation's schools might be organized not on the basis of the disciplines, but on the basis of human commonalties--those universal experiences that are found in all cultures and among all people. They concluded that there are eight fundamental characteristics that bind all people together and that as students study these commonalties they can begin to learn not only about their diversity, but about the human community, as well.

The eight fundamental characteristics are as follows:

1. At the most basic level, all people share the universal human experience of birth and growth and death.

2. In addition to the life cycle, all people on the planet use symbols to express feelings and ideas.

3. Beyond the life cycle and beyond the use of symbols, all people on the planet respond to the aesthetic.

4. All people on the planet have the miraculous capacity to recall the past and to anticipate the future.

5. All people on the planet are members of groups and institutions that consequentially shape their lives.

6. While all people are different, all are connected to the ecology of the planet.

7. All people on the planet produce and consume. Work is universal; it's something everyone does.

8. All people on the planet, regardless of their heritage or tradition, are searching for a larger purpose.

Boyer then asked the reader to reflect on a different way of thinking about schooling.

> Would it be possible in the twenty-first century to stop organizing the curriculum around these dreary and outdated academic subjects, which scholars themselves no longer find very useful? Can we begin instead to organize leaning around the human commonalties so that students would not study the subjects, they'd study themselves, and they would use the academic subjects to illuminate larger, more consequential ends? They would not only discover the human commonalties; they would discover the different ways in which humans around the world express the commonalties that we share. In so doing, the academic subjects would be put toward larger ends. (p. 5)

Whether or not organizing curriculum around life experiences is preferable to organizing curriculum around academic subjects is not at issue here. Instead, the point to be made is that Boyer's approach, which involves a major redesigning of school curriculum, would represent an example of a second-order change. Although a charter school would not be the only forum where such innovations

might be pursued, it does seem likely that such a nontraditional public school setting would offer more fertile soil for truly different ideas to sprout and take root.

Conclusion

To create an environment in which educational innovation can flourish, states must make possible, and indeed encourage, the pursuit of truly different kinds of schooling. Thus, the provisions in charter school legislation are critical.

In some states, charter school legislation offers little more than a form of site-based management; but in other states, legislation authorizes charter schools of a kind that hold real promise for administrative autonomy and educational change. Charter schools, while certainly not the solution for all perceived shortcomings of public education, do offer a real opportunity for creative and innovative educational design.

Perhaps the greatest promise of the charter school movement, given the right kind of legislative authority, lies in the notion of having an opportunity to begin with a clean slate. Educators often complain about the stifling effects of bureaucracy and the dearth of meaningful change. Freeing them from the shackles of traditional thinking might challenge them to conceptualize and implement new models of schooling. Some will accept this challenge, and from their individual charter school initiatives may come an array of innovations that will be of benefit to all of American education.

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